

THE DIPLOMATIC BACKGROUND OF THE FIRST WORLD WAR

edifice which collapsed in 1918 was erected in 1871, when military hegemony in Europe passed from Paris to Berlin. For the next twenty years Bismarck bestrode the Continent like a colossus, but the contriver of three wars was transformed into a pillar of peace. " We are satiated/* he declared, and he meant what he said. Henceforth his task was to buttress the status quo by alliances and ententes. He never expected France to forgive the loss of Alsace and Lorraine, but she was too weak to reconquer them while she stood alone. His aim accordingly was to keep her in quarantine. Austria became an ally in 1879 ; the Triple Alliance was formed in 1882 by the adhesion of Italy; Roumania secretly bound herself to the Central Powers in 1883. With Russia and England it was impossible to conclude similar arrangements, but their benevolent neutrality was secured by the simple expedient of not getting in their way. So far as Germany was concerned Russia could have a free hand in the eastern half of the Balkan peninsula ; and England had no quarrel with a statesman who cared nothing for naval power and little for colonial enterprise. Ruthless in premeditated attack but moderate in the hour of victory, he preached and practised the doctrine of limited liability. Though the German Empire was by far the strongest Power in Europe, he neither overestimated nor overtaxed its strength. It was quite enough -to be exposed to the incurable hostility of France. He had created the nation-state which his countrymen had longed to possess, and he wanted nothing more. Bismarck, like Cavour,

was a great nationalist, never an Imperialist.

With the dropping of the pilot in 1890 the European situation changed rapidly, and the next twenty-four years witnessed the crumbling of the imposing Bismarckian edifice. The first challenge to the status quo was the Franco-Russian alliance, outlined in 1891, concluded in 1893, and announced in 1895. Holy Russk had overcome her instinctive shrinking from Republican France while the Iron Chancellor was still at the helm ; but it was Berlin's non-renewal of his so-called